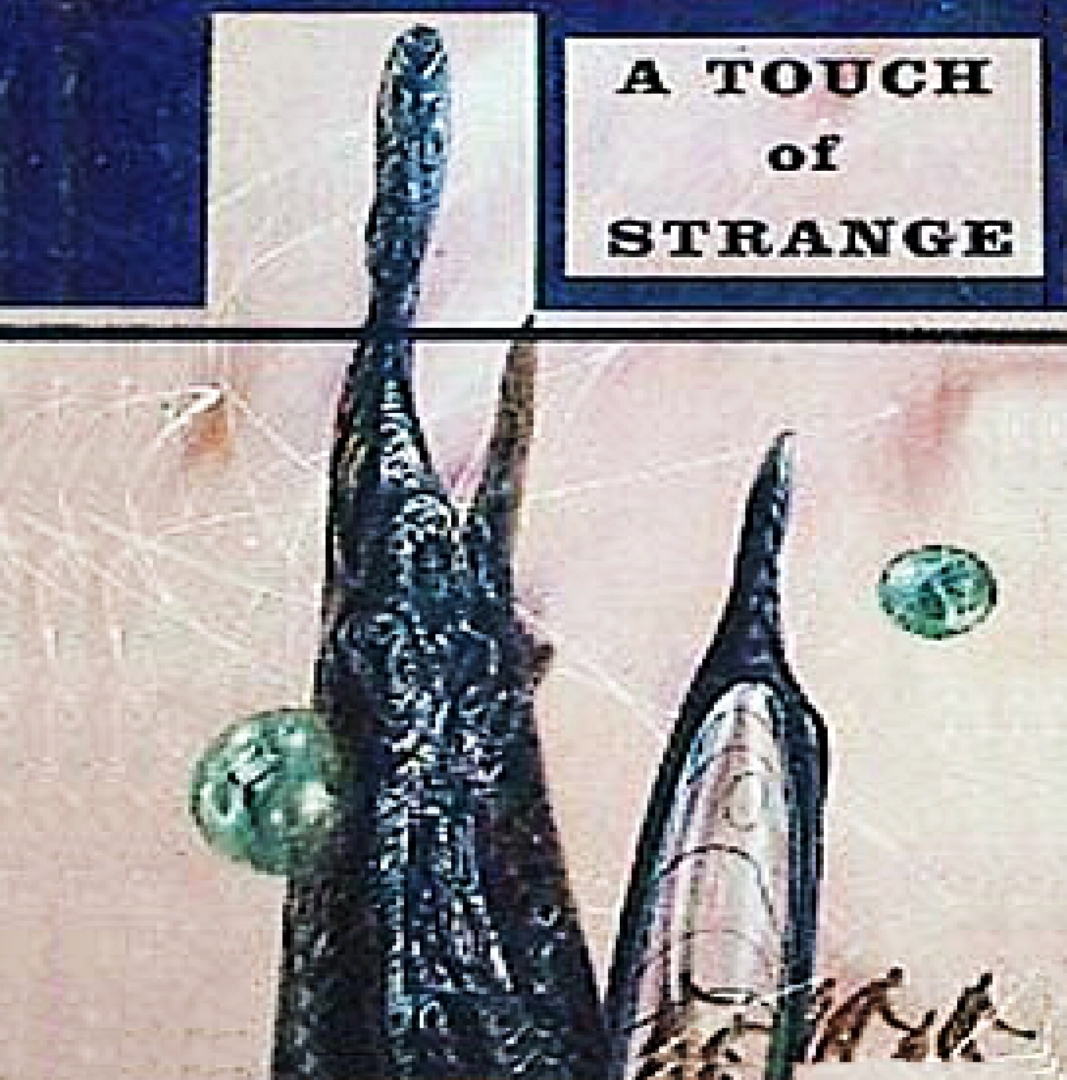




THEODORE  
**STURGEON**

**A TOUCH  
of  
STRANGE**



# The Girl Had Guts

by Theodore Sturgeon

The cabby wouldn't take the fare ("Me take a nickel from Captain Gargan? Not in this life!"), and the doorman welcomed me so warmly I almost forgave Sue for moving into a place that had a doorman.

And then the elevator and then Sue. You have to be away a long time, a long way, to miss someone like that, and me, I'd been farther away than anyone ought to be for too long plus six weeks. I kissed her and squeezed her until she yelled for mercy, and when I got to where I realized she was yelling we were clear back to the terrace, the whole length of the apartment away from the door. I guess I was sort of enthusiastic, but as I said ... oh, who can say a thing like that and make any sense? I was glad to see my wife, and that was it.

She finally got me quieted down and my uniform jacket and shoes off and a dish of ale in my fist, and there I lay in the relaxer looking at her just the way I used to when I could come home from the base every night, just the way I'd dreamed every off-duty minute since we blasted off all those months ago.

Special message to anyone who's never been off Earth: Look around you. Take a good *long* look around.

You're in the best place there is. A fine place.

I said as much to Sue, and she laughed and said, "Even the last six weeks?" and I said, "I don't want to insult you, baby, but yes: even those six weeks in lousy quarantine at the lousy base hospital were good, compared to being anyplace else. But it was the longest six weeks I ever spent; I'll give you that." I pulled her down on top of me and kissed her again. "It was longer than twice the rest of the trip."

She struggled loose and patted me on the head the way I don't like. "Was it so bad really?"

"It was bad. It was lonesome and dangerous and—and disgusting, I guess is the best word for it."

"You mean the plague."

I snorted. "It wasn't a plague."

“Well, I wouldn’t know,” she said. “Just rumors. That thing of you recalling the crew after twelve hours of liberty, for six weeks of quarantine ...”

“Yeah, I guess that would start rumors.” I closed my eyes and laughed grimly. “Let ‘em rumor. No one could dream up anything uglier than the truth. Give me another bucket of suds.”

She did, and I kissed her hand as she passed it over. She took the hand right away and I laughed at her.

“Scared of me or something?”

“Oh lord no. Just ... wanting to catch up. So much you’ve done, millions of miles, months and months

... and all I know is you’re back, and nothing else.”

“I brought the Demon Lover back safe and sound,” I kidded.

She colored up. “Don’t talk like that.” The Demon Lover was my Second, name of Purcell. Purcell was one of those guys who just has to go around making like a bull moose in fly-time, bellowing at the moon and banging his antlers against the rocks.

He’d been to the house a couple or three times and said things about Sue that were so appreciative that I had to tell him to knock it off or he’d collect a punch in the mouth. Sue had liked him, though; well, Sue was always that way, always going a bit out of her way to get upwind of an animal like that. And I guess I’m one of ‘em myself; anyway, it was me she married. I said, “I’m afraid ol’ Purcell’s either a blowhard or he was just out of character when we rounded up the crew and brought ‘em all back. We found ‘em in honky-tonks and strip joints; we found ‘em in the buzzoms of their families behaving like normal family men do after a long trip; but Purcell, we found him at the King George Hotel”—I emphasized with a forefinger—“alone by himself and fast asleep, where he tells us he went as soon as he got earthside. Said he wanted a soak in a hot tub and twenty-four hours sleep in a real 1-G bed with sheets. How’s that for a sailor ashore on his first leave?”

She’d gotten up to get me more ale. “I haven’t finished this one yet!” I said.

She said “Oh” and sat down again. “You were going to tell me about the trip.”

“I was? Oh, all right, I was. But listen carefully, because this is one trip I’m going to forget as fast as I can, and I’m not going to do it again, even in my head.”

.....

I don’t have to tell you about blast-off—that it’s more like drift-off these days, since all long hops start from Outer Orbit satellites, out past the Moon—or about the flicker-field by which we hop faster than light, get dizzyier than a five-year-old on a drug-store stool, and develop more morning sickness than Mom. That I’ve told you before.

So I’ll start with planetfall on Mullygantz II, Terra’s best bet to date for a colonial planet, five-nines Earth Normal (that is, .99999) and just about as handsome a rock as ever circled a sun. We hung the blister in stable orbit, and Purcell and I dropped down in a super-scout with supplies and equipment for the ecological survey station. We expected to find things humming there, five busy people and a sheaf of completed reports, and we hoped we’d be the ones to take back the news that the next ship would be the colony ship. We found three dead and two sick, and knew right away that the news we’d be taking back was going to stop the colonists in their tracks.

Clement was the only one I’d known personally. Head of the station, physicist and ecologist both, and tops both ways, and he was one of the dead. Joe and Katherine Flent were dead. Amy Segal, the recorder—one of the best in Pioneer Service—was sick in a way I’ll go into in a minute, and Glenda Spooner, the plant biologist, was—well, call it withdrawn. Retreated. Something had scared her so badly that she could only sit with her arms folded and her legs crossed and her eyes wide open, rocking and watching.

Anyone gets to striking hero medals ought to make a platter-sized one for Amy Segal. Like I said, she was sick. Her body temperature was wildly erratic, going from 102 all the way down to 96 and back up again. She was just this side of breakdown and must have been like that for weeks, slipping across the line for minutes at a time, hauling herself back for a moment or two, then sliding across again.

But she machinery has to be watched. She not only dragged herself around keeping ink in the recording pens and smo’s and hygros and airsonde recorders needed them, but she kept Glenda fed; more than that, she fed herself.

She fed herself *close to fifteen thousand calories a day*. And she was

forty pounds underweight. She was the weirdest sight you ever saw, her face full like a fat person's but her abdomen, from the lower ribs to the pubes, collapsed almost against her spine. You'd never have believed an organism could require so much food—not, that is, until you saw her eat. She'd rigged up a chopper out of the lab equipment because she actually couldn't wait to chew her food. She just dumped everything and anything edible into that gadget and propped her chin on the edge of the table by the outlet and packed that garbage into her open mouth with both hands. If she could have slept it would have been easier, but hunger would wake her after twenty minutes or so and back she'd go, chop and cram, guzzle and swill. If Glenda had been able to help—but there she was, she did it all herself, and when we got the whole story straight we found she'd been at it for nearly three weeks. In another three weeks they'd have been close to the end of their stores, enough for five people for anyway another couple of months.

We had a portable hypno in the first-aid kit on the scout, and we slapped it to Glenda Spooner with a reassurance tape and a normal sleep command and just put her to bed with it. We bedded Amy down too, though she got a bit hysterical until we could make her understand through that fog of delirium that one of us would stand by every minute with premasticated rations. Once she understood that she slept like a corpse, but such a corpse you never want to see, lying there eating.

It was a lot of work all at once, and when we had it done Purcell wiped his face and said, "Five-nines Earth Normal, hah. No malignant virus or bacterium. No toxic plants or fungi. Come to Mullygantz II, land of happiness and health."

"Nobody's used that big fat *no*, " I reminded him. "The reports only say there's nothing bad here that we know about or can test for. My God, the best brains in the world used to kill AB patients by transfusing type O blood. Heaven help us the day we think we know everything that goes on in the universe."

We didn't get the whole story then; rather, it was all there but not in a comprehensible order. The key to it all was Amy Segal's personal log, which she called a "diary" and kept in hen tracks called shorthand, which took three historians and a philologist a week to decode after we returned to Earth. It was the diary that fleshed the thing out for us, told us about these people and their guts and how they exploded all over each other. So I'll tell it, not the way we got it, but the way it happened.

To begin with, it was a good team. Clement was a good head, one of those relaxed guys who always listens to other people talking. He could get a fantastic amount of work out of a team and out of himself too, and it never showed. His kind of drive is sort of a secret weapon.

Glenda Spooner and Amy Segal were wild about him in a warm, respectful way that never interfered with the work. I'd guess that Glenda was more worshipful about it, or at least, with her it showed more.

Amy was the little mouse with the big eyes that gets happier and stays just as quiet when her grand passion walks into the room, except maybe she works a little harder so he'll be pleased. Clement was bed-friends with both of them, which is the way things usually arrange themselves when there's an odd number of singles on a team. It's expected of them, and the wise exec keeps it going that way and plays no favorites, at least till the job's done.

The Flents, Katherine and Joe, were married, and had been for quite a while before they went Outside.

His specialty was geology and mineralogy, and she was a chemist, and just as their sciences supplemented each other so did their egos. One of Amy's early "diary" entries says they knew each other so well they were one step away from telepathy; they'd work side by side for hours swapping information with grunts and eyebrows.

Just what kicked over all this stability it's hard to say. It wasn't a fine balance; you'd think from the look of things that the arrangement could stand a lot of bumps and friction. Probably it was an unlucky combination of small things all harmless in themselves but having a critical-mass characteristic that nobody knew about. Maybe it was Clement's sick spell that triggered it; maybe the Flents suddenly went into one of those oh-God-what-did-I-ever-see-in-you phases that come over married people who are never separated; maybe it was Amy's sudden crazy yen for Joe Flent and her confusion over it. Probably the worst thing of all was that Joe Flent might have sensed how she felt and caught fire too. I don't know. I guess, like I said, that they all happened at once.

Clement getting sick like that. He was out after bio specimens and spotted a primate. They're fairly rare on Mullygantz II, big ugly devils maybe five feet tall but so fat they outweigh a man two to one. They're mottled pink and gray, and hairless, and they have a face that looks like an angry gorilla when it's relaxed and a ridiculous row of

little pointed teeth instead of fangs. They get around pretty good in the trees, but they're easy to outrun on the ground because they never learned to use their arms and knuckles like the great apes but waddle over the ground with their arms held up in the air to get them out of the way. It fools you. They look so damn silly that you forget they might be dangerous.

So anyway, Clement surprised one on the ground and had it headed for the open fields before it knew what was happening. He ran it to a standstill, just by getting between it and the trees and then approaching it. The primate did all the running; Clement just maneuvered it until it was totally pooped and squatted down to wait its doom. Actually all the doom it would have gotten from Clement was to get stunned, hypoxed, examined, and turned loose, but of course it had no way of knowing that. It just sat there in the grass looking stupid and ludicrous and harmless in an ugly sort of way, and when Clement put out his hand it didn't move, and when he patted it on the neck it just trembled. He was slowly withdrawing his hand to get his stun gun out when he said something or laughed—anyway, made a sound, and the thing bit him.

Those little bitty teeth weren't what they seemed. The gums are retractile and the teeth are really not teeth at all but serrated bone with all those little needles slanting inward like a shark's. The jaw muscles are pretty flabby, fortunately, or he'd have lost an elbow, but all the same, it was a bad bite. Clement couldn't get loose, and he couldn't reach around himself to get to the stun gun, so he drew his flame pistol, thumbed it around to "low", and scorched the primate's throat with it. That was Clement, never wanting to do any more damage than he had to. The primate opened its mouth to protect its throat and Clement got free. He jumped back and twisted his foot and fell, and something burned him on the side of the face like a lick of hellfire. He scrabbled back out of the way and got to his feet. The primate was galloping for the woods on its stumpy little legs with its long arms up over its head—even then Clement thought it was funny. Then something else went for him in the long grass and he took a big leap out of its way.

He later wrote very careful notes on this thing. It was wet and it was nasty and it stunk beyond words.

He said you could search your memory long afterwards and locate separate smells in that overall stench the way you can with the instruments of an orchestra. There was butyl mercaptan and rotten celery, excrement, formic acid, decayed meat, and that certain smell

which is like the taste of some brasses. The burn on his cheek smelt like hydrochloric acid at work on a hydrocarbon; just what it was.

The thing was irregularly spherical or ovoid, but soft and squashy. Fluids of various kinds oozed from it here and there—colorless and watery, clotted yellow like soft-boiled eggs, and blood. It bled more than anything ought to that needs blood; it bled in gouts from openings at random, and it bled cutaneously, droplets forming on its surface like the sweat on a glass of ice water. Cutaneously, did I say? That's not what Clement reported. It looked skinless—flayed was the word he used. Much of its surface was striated muscle fiber, apparently unprotected. In two places that he could see was naked brown tissue like liver, drooling and dripping excretions of its own.

And this thing, roughly a foot and a half by two feet and weighing maybe thirty pounds, was flopping and hopping in a spastic fashion, not caring which side was up (if it had an up) but always moving toward him.

Clement blew sharply out of his nostrils and stepped back and to one side—a good long step, with the agony of his scalded cheek to remind him that wherever the thing had come from, it was high up, and he didn't want it taking off like that again.

And when he turned like that, so did the thing, leaving behind it a trail of slime and blood in the beaten grass, a curved filthy spoor to show him it knew him and wanted him.

He confesses he does not remember dialing up the flame pistol, or the first squeeze of the release. He does remember circling the thing and pouring fire on it while it squirmed and squirted, and while he yelled sounds that were not words, until he and his weapon were spent and there was nothing where the thing had been but a charred wetness adding the smell of burned fat to all the others. He says in his unsparing report that he tramped around and around the thing, stamping out the grass fire he had started, and shaking with revulsion, and that he squatted weakly in the grass weeping from reaction, and that only then did he think of his wounds. He broke out his Pioneer's spectral salve and smeared it liberally on burns and bite both. He hunkered there until the analgesic took the pain away and he felt confident that the wide array of spansuled antibiotics was at work, and then he roused himself and slogged back to the base.

And to that sickness. It lasted only eight days or so and wasn't the kind of sickness that ought to follow such an experience. His arm and



his face healed well and quickly, his appetite was very good but not excessive, and his mind seemed clear enough. But during that time, as he put it in the careful notes he taped on the voicewriter, he felt things he had never felt before and could hardly describe. They were all things he had heard about or read about, foreign to him personally. There were faint shooting pains in his abdomen and back, a sense of pulse where no pulse should be—like that in a knitting bone, but beating in his soft tissues. None of it was beyond bearing. He had a constant black diarrhea, but like the pains it never passed the nuisance stage. One vague thing he said about four times: that when he woke up in the morning he felt that he was in some way different from what he had been the night before, and he couldn't say how. Just ... different.

And in time it faded away and he felt normal again. That was the whole damned thing about what had happened—he was a very resourceful guy, Clement was, and if he'd been giggered just a little more by this he'd have laid his ears back and worked until he knew what the trouble was. But he wasn't pushed into it that way, and it didn't keep him from doing his usual man-and-a-half's hard work each day. To the others he was unusually quiet, but if they noticed it at all it wasn't enough to remark about. They were all working hard too, don't forget. Clement slept alone these eight or nine days, and this wasn't remarkable either, only a little unusual, and not worth comment to either Glenda or Amy, who were satisfied, secure, and fully-occupied women.

But then, here again was that rotten timing, small things on small things. This had to be the time of poor

Amy Segal's trouble. It started over nothing at all, in the chem lab where she was doing the hurry-up-

and-wait routine of a lengthy titration. Joe Flent came in to see how it was going, pass the time of day,

do a little something here, something there with the equipment. He had to move along the bench just where Amy was standing, and, absorbed in what he was doing, he put out his hand to gesture her back, and went on with what he was doing. But—

She wrote it in her diary, in longhand, a big scrawl of it in the middle of those neat little glyphs of hers:

“He *touched* me.” All underlined and everything. All right, it was a nothing: I said that. It was an accident. But the accident had jarred her, and she was made of fulminate of mercury all of a sudden. She stood where she was and let him press close to her, going on with his work, and she almost fainted.

What makes these things happen ...? Never mind; the thing happened. She looked at him as if she had never seen him before, the light on his hair, the shape of his ears and his jaw, the—well, all like that.

Maybe she made a sound and maybe Joe Flent just sensed it, but he turned around and there they were, staring at each other in some sort of mutual hypnosis with God knows what flowing back and forth between them. Then Joe gave a funny little surprised grunt and did not walk, but ran out of there.

That doesn't sound like anything at all, does it? Whatever it was, though, it was enough to throw little Amy Segal into a flat spin of the second order and pop her gimbal bearings. I've read that there used to be a lot of stress and strain between people about this business of sex. Well, we've pretty well cleared that up, in the way we humans generally clear things up, by being extreme about it. If you're single you're absolutely free. If you're married you're absolutely bound. If you're married and you get an external itch, you have your free choice—you stay married and don't scratch it, or you scuttle the marriage and you do scratch it. If you're single you respect the marriage bond just like anyone else; you don't, but I mean you *don't* go holing somebody else's hull.

All of which hardly needs saying, especially not to Amy Segal. But like a lot of fine fools before her, she was all mixed up with what she felt and what she thought she should feel. Maybe she's a throwback to the primitive, when everybody's concave was fair game to anyone else's convex. Whatever it was about her, it took the form of making her hate herself. She was walking around among those other people thinking, “I'm no good, Joe's married and look at me, I guess I don't *care* he's married. What's the matter with me, how could I feel this way about Joe, I must be a monster, I don't deserve to be here among decent people.” And so on. And no one to tell it to. Maybe if Clement hadn't been sick, or maybe if she'd had it in her to confide in one of the other women, or maybe—well, hell with maybes. She was half-blind with misery.

Reading the diary transcript later I wished I could put time back and space too and tap her on the shoulder and say, “Come along, little

girl,” and then put her in a corner and say, “Listen, knothhead, get untied, will you? You got a yen, never mind, it’ll pass. But as long as it lasts, don’t be ashamed of it.”

Damn it, that’s all she needed, just a word like that ...

Then Clement was well again and one night gave her the sign, and she jumped at it, and that was the most miserable thing of all, because after it was over she burst into tears and told him it was the last time, never again. He must’ve been no end startled. He missed the ferry there. He could’ve got the whole story if he’d tried, but he didn’t. Maybe ... maybe he was a little changed from what happened to him, after all. Anyway, poor Amy hit the bottom of the tank about then. She scribbled yards about it in her book. She’d just found out she responded to Clement just like always, and that proved to her that she couldn’t love Joe after all, therefore her love wasn’t real, therefore she wasn’t worth loving, therefore Joe would never love her. Little bubblehead! And the only way out she could see was to force herself to be faithful to somebody, so she was going to “purify her feelings”—that’s what she wrote—by being faithful to Joe, hence no more Clement and of course no Joe. And with that decision she put her ductless glands in a grand alliance with her insanity. Would you believe that anyone in this day and age could

have such a pot boiling inside a fuzzy skull?

From that moment on, Amy Segal was under forced draft. Apparently no one said anything about it, but you just don’t build up incandescence in small dark places without somebody noticing. Katherine Flent must have tumbled early, as women do, and probably said nothing about it, as some women sometimes don’t. Ultimately Joe Flent saw it, and what he went through nobody will ever know. I know he saw it, and felt it, because of what happened. Oh my God, what happened!

It must have been about now that Amy got the same strange almost-sickness Clement had gone through.

Vague throbbings and shiftings in the abdomen, and the drizzles, and again that weird thing about feeling different in the morning and not knowing why. And when she was about halfway through the eight-day siege, damn if Glenda Spooner doesn’t seem to come down with it. Clement did the reporting on this; he was seeing a lot more of Glenda these days and could watch it. He noticed the similarity with his own

illness all right, though it wasn't as noticeable, and called all hands for a report. Amy, possibly Glenda, and Clement had it and could pass it; the Flents never showed the signs. Clement decided finally that it was just one of those things that people get and no one knows why, like the common cold before Billipp discovered it was an allergy to a gluten fraction. And the fact that Glenda Spooner had had such a slight attack opened the possibility that one or both Flents had had it and never known it—and that's something else we'll never know for sure.

Well, one fine day Clement headed out to quarter the shale hills to the north, looking for petroleum if he could find it and anything else if he couldn't. Clement was a fine observer. Trouble with Clement, he was an ecologist, which is mostly a biologist, and biologists are crazy.

The fine day, about three hours after he left, sprung a leak, and the bottom dropped out of the sky—which didn't worry anyone because everyone knew it wouldn't worry Clement.

Only he didn't come back.

That was a long night at the base. Twice searchers started out, but they turned back in the first two hundred yards. Rain can come down like that if it wants to, but it shouldn't keep it up for so long.

Morning didn't stop it, but as soon as it was dark gray outside instead of total black, the Flents and the two girls dropped everything and headed for the hills. Amy and Glenda went to the west and separated and searched the ridge until midafternoon, so it was all over by the time they got back. The Flents took the north and east, and it was Joe who found Clement.

That crazy Clement, he'd seen a bird's nest. He saw it because it was raining and because the fish-head stork always roosts in the rain; if it didn't, its goofy glued-together nest would come unstuck. It's a big bird, larger than a terran stork, snow-white, wide-winged and easy to see, especially against a black shale bluff. Clement wanted a good look at how it sheltered its nest, which looks like half a pinecone as big as half a barrel—you'd think too big for the bird to keep dry. So up he went—and discovered that the fish-head stork's thick floppy neck conceals three, maybe four S-curves underneath all that loose skin.

He was all of nine feet away from the nest, clinging to the crumbly rock wall, when he discovered it, the hard way. The stork's head shot out like a battering ram and caught him right on the breastbone, and

down he went, and I guess that waterlogged shale was waiting just for this, because he started a really good rockslide. He broke his leg and was buried up to the shoulder blades. He was facing up the cliff, with the rain beating down on him almost enough to tear his eyelids. He had nothing to look at except the underside of the nest, which his rock-slide had exposed, and I imagine he looked at it until he understood, much against his will, that the nest was all that was holding up more loosened rock above it; and he put in the night that way, waiting for seepage to loosen the gunk that stuck the nest up there and

send those tons of rock smack in his face. The leg was pretty bad and he probably passed out two or

three times, but never long enough to suit him ... *damn* it! I got a list this long of people who ought to

have things like that happen to them. So it has to happen to Clement.

It was still raining in the morning when Joe Flent found him. Joe let out a roar westward where his wife was combing the rocks, but didn't wait to see if she'd heard. If she didn't, maybe there was a sort of telepathy between them like Amy said in her diary. Anyway, she arrived just in time to see it happen, but not in time to do anything about it.

She saw Joe bending over Clement's head and shoulders where they stuck out of the rock pile, and then she heard a short, sharp shout. It must have been Clement who shouted; he was facing uphill and could see it coming, nest and all. Katherine screamed and ran toward them, and then the new slide reached the bottom, and that was that for Clement.

But not for Joe. Something else got Joe.

It seemed to explode out of the rocks a split second before the slide hit. It took Joe Flent in the chest so hard it lifted him right off his feet and flung him down and away from the slide. Katherine screamed again as she ran, because the thing that had knocked Joe down was bouncing up and down in a crazy irregular hop, each one taking it closer to Joe as he lay on his back half-stunned, and she recognized it for the thing that had attacked Clement the day the primate bit him.

She logged this report on the voicewriter, and I heard the tape, and I

wish they'd transcribe it and then destroy it. Nobody should hear a duty-bound horror-struck soul like that tell such a story. Read it, okay.

But that torn-up monotone, oh God. She was having nine agonies at once, what with her hands all gone and what happened to Joe out there, and what he'd said ... arrgh! I can't tell it without hearing it in my head.

Well. That stinking horror hopped up on Joe and he half sat up and it hopped again and landed right over his face and slumped there quivering, bleeding and streaming rain and acid. Joe flipped so hard his feet went straight up in the air and he seemed to hang there, standing on the back of his head and his shoulder-blades with his arms and legs doing a crazy jumping-jack flailing. Then he fell again with the monstrosity snigger than ever over his face and neck and head, and he squirmed once and then lay still, and that was when Katherine got to him.

Katherine went at that thing with her bare hands. One half-second contact, even in all that rain, was enough to pucker and shrivel her skin, and it must have felt like plunging her hands into smoking deep fat. She didn't say what it felt like. She only said that when she grabbed at the thing to tear it away from Joe's face, it came apart in small slippery handfuls. She kicked at it and her foot went in and through it and it spilled ropy guts and gouted blood. She tore into it again, clawing and batting it away, and that was probably when she did the most damage to her hands. Then she had an idea from somewhere in that nightmare, fell back and took Joe's feet and dragged him twenty feet away—don't ask me how—and turned him over on his face so the last of that mess dropped off him. She skinned out of her shirt and knelt down and rolled him over and sat him up. She tried to wipe his face with the shirt but found she couldn't hold it, so she scooped her ruined hand under it and brought it up and mopped, but what she mopped at wasn't a face any more. On the tape she said, in that flat shredded voice, "I didn't realize that for a while."

She put her arms around Joe and rocked him and said, "Joey, it's Katherine, it's all right, honey.

Katherine's here." He sighed once, a long, shuddering sigh and straightened his back, and a hole bigger

than a mouth opened up in the front of his head. He said, "Amy? Amy?" and suddenly fought Katherine

blindly. She lost her balance and her arm fell away from his back, and he went down. He made one great

cry that raised echoes all up and down the ridge: "A ... meeeee ...," and in a minute or two he was dead.

Katherine sat there until she was ready to go, and covered his face with the shirt. She looked once at the thing that had killed him. It was dead, scattered in slimy bits all over the edge of the rock fall. She went back to the base. She didn't remember the trip. She must have been soaked and chilled to the bone marrow. She apparently went straight to the voicewriter and reported in and then just sat there, three, four hours until the others got back.

Now if only somebody had been there to ... I don't know. Maybe she couldn't have listened, after all that. Who knows what went on in her head while she sat there letting her blood run out of her hands on to the floor? I'd guess it was that last cry of Joe's, because of what happened when Glenda and Amy came in. It might have been so loud in her head that nobody else's voice could get in. But I still wish somebody had been there, somebody who knows about the things people say when they die. Sometimes they're already dead when they say those things; they don't mean anything. I saw an engineer get it when a generator threw a segment. He just said, "Three-eighths ... three-eighths ..." What I'm trying to say, it didn't have to mean anything ... Well, what's the difference now?

They came in dripping and tired, calling out. Katherine Flent didn't answer. They came into the recording shack, Amy first. Amy was half across the floor before she saw Katherine. Glenda was still in the doorway. Amy screamed, and I guess anyone would, seeing Katherine with her hair plastered around her face the way it had dried, and blood all over her clothes and the floor, and no shirt. She fixed her crazy eyes on Amy and got up slowly. Amy called her name twice but Katherine kept on moving, slow, steady, evenly. Between the heels of her ruined hands she held a skinning knife. She probably couldn't have held it tightly enough to do any damage, but I guess that didn't occur to Amy.

Amy stepped back toward the door and with one long step Katherine headed her off and herded her toward the other corner, where there was no way out. Amy glanced behind her, saw the trap, covered her face with her hands, stepped back, dropped her hands. "Katherine!" she screamed. "What is it? What is it? Did you find Clement? Quick!" she rapped at Glenda, who stood frozen in the doorway. "Get Joe."

At the sound of Joe's name Katherine moaned softly and leaped. She was met in mid-air by the same kind of thing that had killed her husband.

The soft horror caught Katherine off the floor in mid-leap and hurled her backward. Her head hit the corner of a steel relay-rack ...

The stench in the small room was quite beyond description, beyond bearing. Amy staggered to the door, pushing an unresisting Glenda ahead of her ...

And there they were as we found them, Purcell and me: one fevered freak that could out-eat six men, and one catatonic.

.....

I sent Purcell out to the shale hill to see if there was enough left of Clement and Joe Flent for an

examination. There wasn't. Animals had scattered Joe's remains pretty thoroughly, and Purcell couldn't

find Clement at all, though he moved the rocks till his hands bled. There had probably been more slides after that rain. Somehow, in those weeks when she maintained the basic instrumentation single-handed, Amy Segal had managed to drag Katherine out and bury her, and clean up the recording room, though nothing but burning would ever get all that smell out of it.

We left everything but the tapes and records. The scout was built for two men and cargo, and getting off the ground with four wasn't easy. I was mighty glad to get back on the bridge of the flicker-ship and away from that five-nines hell. We stashed the two girls in a cabin next to the sick bay and quarantined them, just in case, and I went to work on the records, getting the story in about the order I've given it here.

And once I had it, there wasn't a thing I could do with it. Amy was at all times delirious, or asleep or eating; you could get very little from her, and even then you couldn't trust what you got. From Glenda you got nothing. She just lay still with that pleasant half-smile on her face and let the universe proceed without her. On a ship like ours we are the medical division, the skipper and the officers, and we could do nothing for these two but keep them fed and comfortable; otherwise, we mostly forgot they were aboard. Which was an error.



Status quo, then, as far as I knew, from the time we left the planet until we made Earthfall, was the crew going about its business, the two girls in quarantine with Purcell filling the hopper with food for the one and spoon-feeding the other; and me locked up with the records, piecing and guessing and trying to make sense out of a limbless, eyeless monstrosity which apparently could appear from nowhere in mid-air, even indoors (like the one that killed Katherine Flent), and which looked as if it could not live, but which still would attack and could kill. I got no place. I mulled over more theories than I'll go into, some of 'em pretty far-fetched, like a fourth-dimensional thing that—well, on the other hand, Nature can be pretty far-fetched too, as anyone who has seen the rear end of a mandrill will attest.

What do you know about sea cucumbers, as another nauseating example?

.....

We popped out of the flicker-field in due time, and Luna was good to see. We transferred to a rocket-ferry at Outer Orbit and dropped in smoothly, and came into the base here in quarantine procedure, impounding ferry and all. The girls were at last put into competent hands, and the crew was given the usual screening. Usual or not, it's about as thorough as a physical examination can get, and after they'd all been cleared, and slept six hours, and gone through it again and been cleared again, I gave them seventy-two-hour passes, renewable, and turned 'em loose.

I was more than anxious to go along too, but by that time I was up to the eyeballs in specialists and theorists, and in some specialties and theories that began to get too fascinating for even a home-hungry hound like me to ignore. That was when I called you and said how tied up I was and swore I'd be out of there in another day. You were nice about that. Of course, I had no idea it wouldn't be just one more day, but another six weeks.

Right after the crew was turned loose they called me out of the semantics section, where we were

collating all notes and records, into the psych division.

They had one of the ... the things there.

I have to hand it to those guys. I guess they were just as tempted as

Clement was when he first saw one, to burn it into nothing as fast as it could be burned. I saw it, and that was my first impulse. God. No amount of clinical reporting like Clement's could give you the remotest idea of just how disgusting one of those things is.

They'd been working over Glenda Spooner. Catatonics are hard to do anything with, but they used some high-potency narcosyntheses and some field inductions, and did a regression. They found out just what sort of a catatonic she was. Some, you probably know, retreat like that as a result of some profound shock—after they have been shocked. It's an escape. But some go into that seize-up in the split second *before* the shock. Then it isn't an escape; it's a defense. And that was our girl Glenda.

They regressed her until they had her located out in the field, searching for Clement. Then they brought her forward again, so that in her mind she was contacting Amy, slogging through the rain back to the base. They got to where Amy entered the recording shack and screamed, seeing Katherine Flent looking that way. There they located the exact split second of trauma, the moment when something happened which was so terrible that Glenda had not let herself see it.

More dope, more application of the fields though the helmet they had her strapped into. They regressed her a few minutes and had her approach that moment again. They tried it again, and some more, making slight adjustments each time, knowing that sooner or later they would have the exact subtle nudge that would push her through her self-induced barrier, making her at last experience the thing she was so afraid to acknowledge.

And they did it, and when they did it, the soft gutty *thing* appeared, slamming into a technician fifteen feet away, hitting him so hard it knocked him flat and slid him spinning into the far wall. He was a young fellow named Petri, and it killed him. Like Katherine Flent, he died probably before he felt the acid burns. He went right into the transformer housing and died in a net of sparks.

And as I said, these boys had their wits about them. Sure, someone went to help Petri (though not in time) and someone else went after a flame pistol. He wasn't in time either; because when he got back with it, Shellabarger and Li Kyu had the glass bell off a vacuum rig and had corralled the filthy thing with it. They slid a resilient mat under it and slapped a coupling on top and jettied the jar full of liquid argon.

This time there was no charred mass, no kicked-apart, rain-soaked

scatter of parts to deal with. Here was a perfect specimen, if you can call such a thing perfect, frozen solid while it was still alive and trying to hop up and down and find someone to bubble its dirty acids on. They had it to keep, to slice up with a microtome, even to revive, if anyone had the strong guts.

Glenda proved clearly that with her particular psychic makeup, she had chosen the right defense. When she saw the thing, she died of fright. It was that, just that, that she had tried to avoid with catatonia. The psycho boys breached it, and found out just how right she had been. But at least she didn't die uselessly, like Flent and Clement and poor Katherine. Because it was her autopsy that cleared things up.

One thing they found was pretty subtle. It was a nuclear pattern in the cells of the connective tissue quite

unlike anything any of them had seen before. They checked Amy Segal for it and found the same thing.

They checked me for it and didn't. That was when I sent out the recall order for the whole crew. I didn't

think any of them would have it, but we had to be sure. If that got loose on Earth ...

All but one of the crew had a clean bill when given the new test, and there wasn't otherwise anything wrong with that one.

The other thing Glenda's autopsy revealed was anything but subtle.

Her abdomen was empty.

Her liver, kidneys, almost all of the upper and all of the lower intestine were missing, along with the spleen, the bladder, and assorted tripe of that nature. Remaining were the uterus, with the Fallopian tubes newly convoluted and the ovaries tacked right to the uterus itself; the stomach; a single loop of what had once been upper intestine, attached in a dozen places to various spots on the wall of the peritoneum. It emptied directly into a rectal segment, without any distinctive urinary system, much like the primitive equipment of a bird.

Everything that was missing, they found under the bell jar.

Now we knew what had hit Katherine Flent, and why Amy was empty and starved when we found her.

Joe Flent had been killed by ... one of the ... well, by something that erupted at him as he bent over the trapped Clement. Clement himself had been struck on the side of the face by such a thing—and whose was that?

Why, that primate's. The primate he walked into submission, and touched, and frightened.

It bit him in panic terror. Joe Flent was killed in a moment of panic terror too—not his, but Clement's, who saw the rockslide coming. Katherine Flent died in a moment of terror—not hers, but Amy's, as Amy crouched cornered in the shack and watched Katherine coming with a knife. And the one which had appeared on earth, in the psych lab, why, that needed the same thing to be born in—when the boys forced Glenda Spooner across a mental barrier she could not cross and live.

We had everything now but the mechanics of the thing, and that we got from Amy, the bravest woman yet. By the time we were through with her, every man in the place admired her g—uh, dammit, not that.

Admired her fortitude. She was probed and goaded and prodded and checked, and finally went through a whole series of advanced exploratories. By the time the exploratories began, about six weeks had gone by, that is, six weeks from Katherine Flent's death, and Amy was almost back to normal; she'd tapered off on the calories, her abdomen had filled out to almost normal, her temperature had steadied, and by and large she was okay. What I'm trying to put over is that she had some intestines for us to investigate— *she'd grown a new set.*

That's right. She'd thrown her old ones at Katherine Flent.

There wasn't anything wrong with the new ones, either. At the time of her first examination everything was operating but the kidneys; their function was being handled by a very simple, very efficient sort of filter attached to the ventral wall of the peritoneum. We found a similar organ in autopsying poor Glenda Spooner. Next to it were the adrenals, apparently transferred there from their place astride the original kidneys. And sure enough, we found Amy's adrenals placed that way, and not on the new kidneys. In a fascinating three-day

sequence we saw those new kidneys completed and begin to operate, while the

surrogate organ that had been doing their work atrophied and went quiet. It stayed there, though, ready.

The climax of the examination came when we induced panic terror in her with a vivid abreaction of the events in the recording shack the day Katherine died. Bless that Amy, when we suggested it she grinned and said, "Sure!"

But this time it was done under laboratory conditions, with a high-speed camera to watch the proceedings. Oh God, did they proceed!

The film showed Amy's plain, pleasant, sleeping face with its stainless halo of psych-field hood, which was hauling her subjective self back to that awful moment in the records shack. You could tell the moment she arrived there by the anxiety, the tension, the surprise and shock that showed on her face.

"Glenda!" she screamed, "Get Joe!"—and then ...

It looked at first as if she was making a face, sticking out her tongue. She was making a face all right, the mask of purest, terminal fear, but that wasn't a tongue. It came out and out, unbelievably fast even on the slow-motion frames of the high-speed camera. At its greatest, the diameter was no more than two inches, the length ... about eight feet. It arrowed out of her mouth, and even in mid-air it contracted into the roughly spherical shape we had seen before. It struck the net that the doctors had spread for it and dropped into a plastic container, where it hopped and hopped, sweated, drooled, bled and died. They tried to keep it alive, but it wasn't meant to live more than a few minutes.

On dissection they found it contained all Amy's new equipment, in sorry shape. All abdominal organs can be compressed to less than two inches in diameter, but not if they're expected to work again. These weren't.

The thing was covered with a layer of muscle tissue, and dotted with two kinds of ganglia, one sensory and one motor. It would keep hopping as long as there was enough of it left to hop, which was what the motor system did. It was geotropic, and it would alter its muscular spasms to move it toward anything around it that lived and had warm blood, and that's what the primitive sensory system was for.

And at last we could discard the fifty or sixty theories that had been formed and decide on one: That the primates of Mullygantz II had the ability, like a terran sea cucumber, of ejecting their internal organs when frightened and of growing a new set; that in a primitive creature this was a survival characteristic, and the more elaborate the ejected matter the better the chances for the animal's survival. Probably starting with something as simple as a lizard's discarding a tail segment which just lies there and squirms to distract a pursuer, this one had evolved from "distract" to "attract" and finally to "attack." True, it took a fantastic amount of forage for the animal to supply itself with a new set of innards, but for vegetarian primates on fertile Mullygantz II, this was no problem.

The only problem that remained was to find out exactly how terrans had become infected, and the records cleared that up. Clement got it from a primate's bite. Amy and Glenda got it from Clement. The Flents may well never have had it. Did that mean that Clement had bitten those girls? Amy said no, and experiments proved that the activating factor passed readily from any mucous tissue to any other. A bite would do it, but so would a kiss. Which didn't explain our one crew member who "contracted" the condition. Nor did it explain what kind of a survival characteristic it is that can get transmitted around like a virus infection, even between species.

Within that same six weeks of quarantine, we even got an answer to that. By a stretch of the imagination, you might call the thing a virus. At least, it was a filterable organism which, like the

tobacco mosaic or the slime mold, had an organizing factor. You might call it a life form, or a complex

biochemical action, basically un-alive. You could call it symbiotic. Symbiotes often go out of their way

to see to it that the hosts survive.

After entering a body, these creatures multiplied until they could organize, and then went to work on the host. Connective tissue and muscle fiber was where they did most of their work. They separated muscle fibers all over the peritoneal walls and diaphragm, giving a layer to the entrails and the rest to the exterior. They duplicated organic functions with their efficient, primitive little surrogate organs and glands. They hooked the illium to the stomach wall and to the rectum, and in a dozen places to their new organic structures. Then

they apparently stood by.

When an emergency came, every muscle in the abdomen and throat cooperated in a single, synchronized spasm, and the entrails, sheathed in muscle fiber and dotted with nerve ganglia, were compressed into a long tube and forced out like a bullet. Instantly the revised and edited abdomen got to work, perforating the new stomach outlet, sealing the old, and starting the complex of simple surrogates to work. And as long as enough new building material was received fast enough, an enormously accelerated rebuilding job started, blueprinted God knows how from God knows what kind of cellular memory, until in less than two months the original abdominal contents, plus revision, were duplicated, and all was ready for the next emergency.

Then we found that in spite of its incredible and complex hold on its own life and those of its hosts, it had no defense at all against one of humanity's oldest therapeutic tools, the RF fever cabinet. A high-frequency induced fever of 108 sustained seven minutes killed it off as if it had never existed, and we found that the "revised" gut was in every way as good as the original, if not better (because damaged organs were replaced with healthy ones if there was enough of them left to show original structure)—and that by keeping a culture of the Mullygantz "virus" we had the ultimate, drastic treatment for forty-odd types of abdominal cancer—including two types for which we'd had no answer at all!

So it was we lost the planet and gained it back with a bonus. We could cause this thing and cure it and diagnose it and use it, and the new world was open again. And that part of the story, as you probably know, came out all over the newsfax and 'casters, which is why I'm getting a big hello from taxi drivers and doormen ...

.....

"But the 'fax said you wouldn't be leaving the base until tomorrow noon!" Sue said after I had spouted all this to her and at long last got it all off my chest in one great big piece.

"Sure. They got that straight from me. I heard rumors of a parade and speeches and God knows what else, and I wanted to get home to my walkin' talkin' wettin' doll that blows bubbles."

"You're silly."

"C'mere."

The doorbell hummed.

“I’ll get it,” I said, “and throw ‘em out. It’s probably a reporter.”

But Sue was already on her feet. “Let me, let me. You just stay there and finish your drink.” And before I could stop her she flung into the house and up the long corridor to the foyer.

I chuckled, drank my ale and got up to see who was horning in. I had my shoes off, so I guess I was pretty quiet. Though I didn’t need to be. Purcell was roaring away in his best old-salt fashion, “Let’s have us another quickie, Susie, before the Space Scout gets through with his red-carpet treatment tomorrow—miss me, honey?” ... while Sue was imploringly trying to cover his mouth with her hands.

Maybe I ran; I don’t know. Anyway, I was there, right behind her. I didn’t say anything. Purcell looked at me and went white. “Skipper ...”

And in the hall mirror behind Purcell, my wife met my eyes. What she saw in my face I cannot say, but in hers I saw panic terror.

In the small space between Purcell and Sue, something appeared. It knocked Purcell into the mirror, and he slid down in a welter of blood and stinks and broken glass. The recoil slammed Sue into my arms. I put her by so I could watch the tattered, bleeding thing on the floor hop and hop until it settled down on the nearest warm living thing it could sense, which was Purcell’s face.

I let Sue watch it and crossed to the phone and called the commandant. “Gargan,” I said, watching.

“Listen, Joe, I found out that Purcell lied about where he went in that first liberty. Also why he lied.” For a few seconds I couldn’t seem to get my breath. “Send the meat wagon and an ambulance, and tell Harry to get ready for another hollowbelly ... Yes, I said, one dead ... Purcell, dammit. Do I have to draw you a cartoon?” I roared, and hung up.

I said to Sue, who was holding onto her flat midriff, “That Purcell, I guess it did him good to get away with things under my nose. First that helpless catatonic Glenda on the way home, then you. I hope you had a real good time, honey.”



It smelled bad in there, so I left. I left and walked all the way back to the Base. It took about ten hours.

When I got there I went to the Medical wing for my own fever-box cure and to do some thinking about girls with guts, one way or the other. And I began to wait. They'd be opening up Mullygantz II again, and I thought I might look for a girl who'd have the ... fortitude to go back with me. A girl like Amy.

Or maybe Amy.

The End